

The Northwest Straits Initiative and Conservation In Puget Sound: A Bioregionalist Analysis

Sean Harrington

Masters candidate, Evergreen State College Environmental Studies program

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Abstract

The recent history of the area of Northern Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca known as the Northwest Straits has been one of successive attempts to arrive at a conservation solution that is appropriate and workable for the interests of conservation of marine resources and of local human communities. The Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative has the potential to satisfy both of these interests, and to do so in a way that creates a "bioregional" governance structure, in which the larger scale ecosystem is managed cooperatively from the bottom up.

This thesis sought to examine primarily the question of whether the Northwest Straits Initiative is in fact bioregional in form and method of operation. This was done through the establishment of evaluative criteria derived through discussion of the theoretical principles seen as constituting bioregionalism. Additionally, the place of the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative within the context of Washington State governance structures was examined.

The conclusion was reached that the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative is both bioregional in form and method of action, and is furthermore emblematic of a general shift in attitudes toward more cooperative forms of governance in Washington State.

Introduction

In response to anger, fear and frustration at the prospect of further intrusion by distant regulatory bureaucracy (*i.e.* federal and even state-level natural resource agencies), a network of Marine Resource Committees, or MRCs, was advanced as a method by which local communities could gain some control over the way their marine waters are used while retaining a balancing regional-scale focus. Marine Resource Committees are concerned with issues of both habitat conservation and resource extraction, as opposed to stricter protectionist structures such as parks and refugia. The concept of a network of Marine Resource Committees was adopted as a potentially valuable management structure by several communities in Washington State- areas where dependence on the marine environment extends beyond shipping. The network, known as the Northwest Straits Commission (NWSC) was federally sanctioned by the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative (or Northwest Straits Initiative, NWSI).

The creation of MRCs and the Northwest Straits Commission (both under the aegis of the NWSI) could be viewed as a move toward acceptance of the philosophy known as bioregionalism as a framework for natural resource policy development. Bioregionalism as a concept has been around since the 1970s. It was proposed as a counter to what was perceived at that time to be a worrying trend toward globalization and the disappearance of localized human cultures. Principally pushed for by "downwardly mobile" wilderness enthusiasts and community activists, bioregionalism as a generalized theory of community-and-ecosystem based management has remained to a large extent the province of fringe elements of society. Such fringe elements, unsurprisingly, often call for a complete restructuring of society and government. Prescriptions this extreme are for most of society unwelcome and therefore unlikely, but the basic premise of being mindful of natural ecological regions and empowering local human communities is not without worth or utility within the existing governmental structure.

This thesis utilized a case-study methodology to investigate first the validity of the hypothesis, that the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, while not resulting in a radical restructuring of government, is bioregional in its orientation and mode of action. The primary research hypothesis was followed by a corollary or secondary hypothesis, which stated that as evidenced by the NWSI, the trend in Washington State has been for some time toward more bioregional governance.

The work was divided into six chapters, the first of which was devoted to an exploration of the theoretical concepts which, taken together, make up the field of bioregionalism. This included first a brief history of bioregionalism that related as antecedent concepts regionalism and regional planning. Regionalism was also explored in a more contemporary form through several aspects of the European Union. The basic central ideas of bioregionalism, that of ecological sensitivity and decentralization of government, and the theoretical forms they take, were explored. The chapter concludes with a derivation of three important criteria for use in the evaluation of the primary research hypothesis. These criteria state that in order to be considered bioregional, a system must do the following:

1. Enhance the participation of local communities in decisions which affect the functioning of local ecosystems, including the use of natural resources.
2. Create networks of cooperation within and between communities.
3. Address the issue of government scale in such a way as to develop a governance system that addresses human needs within an ecologically defined region.

The second chapter furnished a local grounding by more specifically describing and establishing several categories of marine resource issues facing Puget Sound. These issues must be addressed, it was argued, if marine resource management (*i.e.* sustainable resource use and retention of ecosystem functioning) is to be successful. The chapter then moved into an exploration of the recent experience of marine conservation in Washington State, in relation to three differing programs. The first is a state of Washington program, the Puget Sound Water Quality Authority/Action Team, which was created to oversee and advise state agencies on policy relating to water quality across the Puget Sound region. Second is the federal National Marine Sanctuary Program, through which a federally regulated conservation area was proposed and for a time planned in the Northwest Straits area. Third is the NWSI, which was developed in response to a shift in local opinion regarding the planned (and subsequently dropped) National Marine Sanctuary. The ways in which each of these programs has addressed the established categories of marine resource issues were discussed and compared.

In Chapter Three, the selected case studies were presented. The histories of two of the seven established MRCs, those of San Juan and Snohomish counties, were related individually. These two MRC case studies were chosen on the basis of several characteristics that rendered them opposite to each other, and were therefore believed to be most instructive of the general experiences of the MRCs. Chapter Four follows, and evaluates the case studies in relation to the three criteria derived in Chapter One as indicative of conformity to the generalized bioregional model, thus assessing the veracity of the primary research hypothesis. This was found to be true, and therefore the second hypothesis was explored.

Chapter Five presents an evaluation of the NWSI in relation to the matrix of local, supra-local, and state-level governance structures of Washington State. This chapter investigated the secondary research hypothesis by comparing the structure and mode of action of the NWSI and its MRCs to that of several of what were termed "Auxiliary Governance Bodies," or AGBs. These bodies have been created by various acts of the Washington State Legislature to deal with issues at a level that is usually supra-local yet not necessarily county, nor usually quite state.

Finally, Chapter Six presents the overarching conclusions of the thesis and discusses their implications for future action. It was concluded that the Marine Resources Committees and the Northwest Straits Commission have formed a working compromise between the dreams of bioregionalists and the necessities of modern governmental natural resources management. The criteria derived from Chapter One's discussion of bioregionalist theory are seen to be somewhat non-exclusive when taken individually (*i.e.* many initiatives, such as those which result in the creation of Auxiliary Governance Bodies, can be thought of as fulfilling at least one of the criteria), but taken together they form a useful tool for assessing whether an initiative is oriented along the lines of bioregionalist theory. Furthermore, several of the AGB's examined in Chapter Five were seen to exhibit some or all of the established criteria for being bioregional, lending evidence to support the secondary research hypothesis.